Looking back on my childhood, I’d characterize it by saying that I spent a good chunk of my time living as a ‘young carer’ without even realizing it. For the majority of it, my step-dad battled with an addiction to alcohol and I had grown accustomed to him stumbling through the door not long after I had come home from school. His balance was always off and his slurred speech always gave away his lack of sobriety. It didn’t take me long to learn and expect that any encounter I had with my step-dad would be one in which he was not sober. As my mum was usually working late, the responsibility of doing household tasks and taking care of my younger sibling after school became a part of my daily routine. It was what I came to perceive as normal. I came to perceive this after-school occurrence of watching my intoxicated step-dad stumble through the door and consequently being unable to care for my sibling and I as ‘normal.’ I felt as though it was only natural for me to assume the responsibility of ‘primary carer’ since my step-dad was unable to be one for us. Although I felt the need and importance to assume these responsibilities, providing constant caregiving for my brother and I compromised the time in which I was able to sit down and complete my assigned homework. As a result, I began to struggle with my academics. My grades were often mediocre (at best) and I often lost marks due to not being able to complete assignments on time. A part of me always knew that my poor academic performance could be attributed to having to deal and cope with my step-dad’s addiction, however, I never regretted deprioritizing my homework assignments when it meant ensuring that my brother was taken care of.
Although this put a strain on my ability to juggle the demands of school, struggling as a young carer put a strain on my capacity to socialize with friends that lived nearby. I never really told anyone about my step-dad’s addiction and that when I went home, I was taking care of my brother and organizing things around the house. I never told my friends why I couldn’t go over and play at their house on a school night; it was much easier to tell a mere lie about having too much school work to do than to tell them the truth of what I was really doing. I was partly anxious and partly embarrassed to tell others about my situation at the time; it was simply easier to say nothing at all.

The whole time I experienced this, it never even occurred to me that I fell under the ‘young carer’ definition. Although I knew that I wasn’t completely isolated in what I was experiencing -- some part of me knew that there were other kids who, like me, cared for their family in a similar way -- I had no way of finding and connecting with them. And to add to that, I had no idea how to articulate what I was experiencing nor was I comfortable enough at the time to talk about it.

Recently, I have learned more about ‘young carers,’ the impacts caring can have on the carer and the family they care for, and some of the available supports that are beginning to gain momentum within Ontario (which, surprisingly, is still a novel idea). I am now twenty-four years old and am just beginning to learn of how prevalent the ‘young carer’ population is. I’ve been taking a Knowledge Translation class where I have learned that in addition to youth identifying as a ‘young carer,’ there are still many youth that remain in the dark in terms of not knowing that they fit the ‘young carer’ criterion.

Reflecting on my experience as a young carer coupled with what I know now, I find myself frequently wondering if I would do anything differently. Would I have done anything differently? Would I just leave everything the way it was? The answer to this is twofold. I would not have altered my caring responsibilities, as I cared deeply for my brother and my step-dad and wanted to ensure that they were alright. What I would change, however, would be having more courage to share my experience with other people. My experience of caring isolated me from hanging out with my friends and, left me feeling too afraid to talk to my teacher to explain why sometimes my assignments were late. When you are a young carer, you begin to perceive the act of juggling the demands of your caring responsibilities, academic responsibilities, and social activities as normal when, in actuality, it is very far from that. Sometimes seeking out formalized supports in the community can be intimidating. Nonetheless, I think the value in even confiding in one person and receiving support from that one individual has the potential to go a long way. Change doesn’t happen overnight, but being willing to share your story is powerful and it’s an important tool to use in order to be heard. ‘Young Carers’ are compassionate individuals that care immensely and deeply for the people in their life, and we need to be cared for too.